

Book review

Samuel. W Bloom, *The word as scalpel: A history of medical sociology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002 (353pp., \$19.95 (paper)).

Bloom's account of American medical sociology is a sociologist's history—it contains rich detail about people and events, interviews with participants, and, rather deliciously, the occasional item of gossip (such as W.I. Thomas's indiscretion in a hotel room).

The strength of this book is its attention to context. Bloom acknowledges the influence of socio-political and economic factors on medical sociology, from world wars to Reagan's funding cuts, and shows how the American research-based university was crucial in nurturing the fledgling sub-discipline. Eminent figures are named, but Bloom also pays respect to those lesser-known individuals who played their part in this history. Describing now classic studies—for example Hollingshead and Redlich's work linking social class and mental illness—he reminds us that many of the concepts and theories we take for granted were once novel. Bloom's account of the relationship between medical sociology and psychiatry explains why its research endeavours were closely entwined with the National Institute of Mental Health. He also describes the vital role played by charitable foundations, such as Russell Sage, in supporting

research and the programs which trained so many of the key figures in medical sociology.

Though Bloom notes that American medical sociology crossed paths with the sub-discipline in other countries, the book's focus inevitably whets the appetite for parallel volumes on the history of medical sociology in other places. Bloom provides an enthusiastic, insightful description of the unique group of people who pioneered medical sociology in the mid-twentieth century. Like the reminiscences of a tribal elder, we have here the good and bad old days, pen-portraits of the extended clan, and careful recollection of significant events. Comparatively less space is devoted to 1980–2000 perhaps implying that the sub-discipline is now less exciting than it once was, though this reflects Bloom's role in the earlier action and his enthusiasm for the memories described. This is a scholarly book to be read by the newcomer or old hand, equally well placed in a sabbatical suitcase as general interest or on the key reference list of the student of the history of medical sociology.

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